

## Lesson 5

# The Work of the Spirit Before Conversion

## Introduction

Over the last five centuries, the matter of how the Holy Spirit works in converting the lost has been the source of great debate. Like most things, some on both sides have gone to extremes. Many Calvinists, for example, completely eliminate mankind's responsibility when it comes to salvation — assigning all activity to God. Man is helpless to resist God's call — a person will play no role whatsoever. The Restoration Movement has tended toward the other extreme - almost completely removing God out of involvement with a person's salvation — insisting that the Word *alone* works to bring people to salvation.

Over the next few lessons, we will cover this topic in depth. These will cover four things related to the Spirit's work in our salvation:<sup>26</sup>

- What the Spirit does *before conversion* to bring the sinner to faith and repentance.
- What the Spirit does *during conversion* to regenerate the sinner.
- Holy Spirit Baptism
- What the Spirit does *after conversion* in the work of sanctification.

This week's lesson will cover the first of these four aspects.

## A Brief Summary of 5-Point Calvinism and How it Perceives the Work of the Spirit in Moving People to Faith and Repentance

Five-point Calvinism is a basic summary of the major doctrines affirmed by those in the Dutch Reformed church who stood in opposition to Arminianism in 1618-19. The Synod and Canons of Dort, held in Dordrecht, Holland, crafted five articles (the Canons of Dordrecht), that explained doctrines on "sin and God's sovereignty in salvation."<sup>27</sup> While there are references by theologians to the five points in the 19th century, the T.U.L.I.P. acronym did not become prevalent until the early 20th century.

These doctrines can be thusly summarized:<sup>28</sup>

- **Total Depravity.** Every person is born with a sinful nature and is at enmity with God. There is no part uninfected and this makes the natural man or woman unable to know or obey God.
- **Unconditional Election.** God elects to save some on the basis of His sovereignty and love, not on the basis of any merit or efforts on the part of humans.

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<sup>26</sup> For more clarification on defining "conversion," see the opening sections of the next lesson.

<sup>27</sup> Kapic, Kelly M., and Wesley Vander Lugt. *Pocket Dictionary of the Reformed Tradition*. The IVP Pocket Reference Series. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> McKim, Donald K. *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms. Second Edition, Revised and Expanded*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

- **Limited Atonement.** Jesus died only for the elect, who are the only recipients of salvation. a.k.a., “particular redemption.”
- **Irresistible Grace.** When God chooses a person for salvation, the person will have no choice but to respond affirmatively. God’s purpose will not be thwarted.
- **Perseverance of the Saints.** The elect of salvation are held secure by God’s power, despite temptation and sin. Their salvation will not be lost.

When we consider whether the Holy Spirit works apart from the word, Calvinists must answer “yes.” If, according to Calvinism, humans are born completely incapable of choosing good, then the Word of God by itself is powerless to move a person to faith and repentance. Only the direct working of the Spirit can unlock a person’s heart, thereby giving them the potential to believe and repent. “By himself man can never turn to God. He is totally depraved. His intellect, will, and emotions are corrupt through and through. Thus, it is an absolute impossibility for natural man to turn to God without the Spirit of the living God.”<sup>29</sup>

This direct work of the Spirit is called *irresistible grace*. According to Cottrell, “it is performed only upon those sinners whom God has unconditionally elected to salvation, and under normal circumstances it is performed in connection with the preaching of the gospel.”<sup>30</sup> The action of the Spirit is referred to as *regeneration*, which lifts the sinner out of his condition of total depravity and restores to him the ability to believe and repent.” Simultaneously, the Spirit directly bestows the gifts of faith and repentance. In advocating this position, Kuyper writes:<sup>31</sup>

“the work of grace does not begin with faith or with repentance or contrition, but that these are preceded by God’s act of giving power to the powerless, hearing to the deaf, and life to the dead.”

According to Calvinists, when the Spirit plants the seed, it is unknown by the man, woman, boy, girl, etc. Kuyper says:

“the first conscious and comparatively cooperative act of man is always preceded by the original act of God, planting in him the first principle of a new life, under which act man is wholly passive and unconscious.” The initial act of regeneration, “when the Lord plants the new life in the dead heart,” is not “dependent upon the preaching of the Word; and therefore may precede the preaching.”

Walvoord<sup>32</sup> calls this efficacious grace. It is “always effectual” and is “never resisted.” Those who receive it are “instantly saved.” This doctrine is required by total depravity:

“If one accepts the Biblical revelation of man’s state of spiritual death and total inability, he must accept the doctrine of efficacious grace as the solution to the problem.”

So, in summary, because of total depravity, Calvinism insists that the Holy Spirit directly bestows a regenerating grace upon the sinner that is:

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<sup>29</sup> Palmer, Edwin H. *The Person and Ministry of the Holy Spirit: The Traditional Calvinistic Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974.

<sup>30</sup> Cottrell, *What the Bible says about the Holy Spirit*, p. 214.

<sup>31</sup> Kuyper, Abraham. *The Work of the Holy Spirit*. New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900.

<sup>32</sup> Walvoord, John F. *The Holy Spirit*. Galaxie Software, 2008.

- selective (via unconditional election).
- irresistible.
- precedes faith and repentance.

## How the Restoration Movement Responded to Calvinism's Teachings Regarding the Spirit's Work in Conversion

From the beginning of the Restoration Movement and going forward to now, members of the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ have mainly opposed the view that the Holy Spirit works *directly* upon the sinner's heart during conversion. It is argued that conversion is a change of a person's feelings, emotions, and motives only by their own choice under the influence of words or arguments. Thus, the Spirit operates *only* through the word.

The two following quotes appear in Cottrell's book. Both are early Restoration Movement writers who clearly present the position traditionally maintained within the churches of Christ:

"I believe that the Holy Spirit exerts no influence on the hearts of sinners over and above the word: that his influences are in the facts he has revealed in the gospel, the evidence by which he has confirmed these facts, and in the motives to obedience presented in the Scriptures of Truth" (B. F. Hall, 1837).

"The Holy Spirit operates upon the heart of the sinner in conversion through the truth, and that truth is the gospel message, the word of God. The New Testament does not teach that the Holy Spirit operates in any other way in conversion than through the instrumentality of the word" (Garth Black).

The weight of almost 200 years of teaching has resulted in many equating any "direct operation" of the Spirit with Calvinism.

J. D. Thomas writes:

"Faith is not based upon any power other than the word of the gospel. No divine power of any kind ever 'forces faith' in an irresistible way."<sup>33</sup>

Boles writes:

"The New Testament does not teach that the Holy Spirit operates directly upon the heart of the sinner; there is no teaching that the Holy Spirit comes directly, immediately, independently into the hearts of sinners and converts them. There is no case on record in the New Testament where anyone was converted who did not first hear the truth, believe in Christ, repent of sin, and was baptized into Christ"<sup>34</sup>

## Necessary Components of Faith and Repentance

### *Calvinism Must be Rejected*

Total depravity is not Biblical. (See Matthew 18.3; Romans 9.11; Ezekiel 18.4-9; 20-21.) Once that is proven, the rest of the doctrines in the T.U.L.I.P. acronym fall on their own, most notably the doctrine of irresistible grace. **Regeneration does not precede faith.** The ability to have faith and move in

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas, J.D. *The Spirit and Spirituality*. Abilene, TX: Biblical Research Press, 1966.

<sup>34</sup> Boles, H. Leo. *The Holy Spirit: His Personality, Nature, Works*. Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1956. p. 199.

repentance are not gifts of God. The grace necessary to be regenerated is given to every person, not only a few God unconditionally elected. Grace can be resisted.

### ***Personal Choice***

Conversion is properly defined as the exact moment when the lost sinner becomes saved. This is driven by the conscious change within the sinner's mind on the basis of his/her personal choice.

- **A person must decide to believe.** See John 20.30-31; Acts 16.31; Romans 10.9; Galatians 2.16.
- **A person must decide to repent.** See Luke 13.3, 5; 2 Peter 3.9; Matthew 3.2; Luke 5.32; Acts 8.22; 17.30; 26.20. Repentance is specifically linked to forgiveness of sins, Luke 3.3; 24.47; Acts 2.38; 3.19; 5.31; 8.22. Repentance leads to life, Acts 11.8, and to salvation, 2 Corinthians 7.10.

### ***Faith leading to salvation includes two components:***

#### **Agreement**

This is an act of the will that acknowledges a truth-claim. It involves accepting the truth of someone else's testimony in the absence of one's own firsthand experience, (2 Corinthians 5.7; Hebrews 11.1, 6; John 14.10-11; John 20.31). This involves knowledge/awareness as well as understanding and the ability to make a decision.

#### **Trust**

This is a personal surrender to the implications and consequences of this truth. Saving faith is a decision of the will to let go of everything - time, possessions, abilities, life itself, and eternal destiny -- and give oneself into the hands of Jesus Christ. Christians rest their hope of eternal life upon the cross of Christ and His resurrection. The concept of trust is seen in passages like John 3.16; Acts 10.43; 16.31; 1 Timothy 1.16.

### ***Repentance leading to salvation involves three components:***

#### **Intellectual change**

Repentance is a change of mind about one's own sin. It involves understanding what sin is, what attitudes and actions lead to it, and understanding that one has sinned.

#### **Emotional change**

This is a change of attitude toward sin. What was once loved is now hated or despised. There is a sense of remorse, sorrow, or grief. See Psalm 51.17; 2 Corinthians 7.9-10.

#### **An act of the will**

It involves a desire, a decision, and a determination to forsake sin and turn to God. See 1 Thessalonians 1.9; Acts 3.19; 11.21; 26.18. In the New Testament, when people are called to conversion, they are directed to turn their will to the will of God. This is a decision the sinner makes in his/her own heart. In no case does the New Testament say that God turns the sinner.

## ***A Human-Turning Must Take Place***

Salvation from God is something that follows the human turning. A great example is seen in 2 Corinthians 3.16. There, turning to the Lord precedes the removal of the veil that prevents a right understanding of His word. See also Matthew 13.15; Mark 4.12; Acts 3.19; 26.18.

Where does saving faith originate? What moves the will to accept the truth of the Scriptures? To depend on the promises made?

What changes the mind about sin? What moves the mind to surrender to the Lordship of Jesus?

What role does the Holy Spirit play in all of this?

## **The Power of God's Word**

The Word of God contains all the power necessary to impact a person's intellect, emotions, and will, enough to accept the truth about sin and salvation, to hate his/her own personal sins, and to turn to Jesus trusting in Him for eternal life.

### ***What the Bible Says About Itself***

#### **In the Old Testament**

- Psalm 119.11, 104, 120, 136, 145.
- Psalm 19.7, 11.
- David promised to use God's word to convert other sinners: Psalm 51.13.

The law of God convicted Israel during the days of Josiah: 2 Kings 22.8-13.

#### **In the New Testament**

- Acts 11.20-21; 14.15; 26.19-20. In these examples, God's appointed spokespersons proclaimed the word which elicited faith and repentance from sinners.
- There are 21 examples of conversion in Acts. In every case the converts acted upon the word that was proclaimed to them.
- Luke 8.4-8, 11-12 - the seed is the word of God.
- John 8.32 - the truth, when known, makes one free.
- John 20.31 - note the purpose for which John wrote his gospel.
- Romans 1.16; 10.17 - the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. What prompts this faith? Faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.

Hebrews 4.12 - the word is powerful enough to pierce the most calloused heart.

### ***What Fills the Word with Power?***

- *Truth.* There is inherent power in truth. Lies are also powerful, but truth always “rings true” to honest seekers. Jesus called God’s word truth, John 17.17. Because it is, it has the power to pierce through to the depths of our hearts and lay us bare before God and before our own eyes, Hebrews 4.12-13.
- *Content.* The message about Jesus has the ability to move hearts. Understanding how Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead will stir the heart and move the will to make decisions regarding faith and repentance.
- *Source.* It is the word of God. There is only one message that comes from God Himself and when we understand the Bible’s true origin, how can we not be moved by it? See Romans 3.2 NIV.

## The Spirit and the Word

How does the Spirit make believers out of unbelievers? What is His role in moving sinners to faith and repentance? The Holy Spirit works to bring unbelievers to faith and repentance through the Word of God as His instrument. How is this so?

*Because of His role in inspiration.* The Spirit is the author of everything in the Bible. See Nehemiah 9.30; 1 Peter 1.12; Ephesians 6.17. Whatever is accomplished by the Biblical message is ultimately accomplished by the Spirit Himself. The spirit influences the hearts of sinners by working *indirectly* through His own inspired word.

*Because of His mission to convict the world of sin.* Jesus, in John 16.8-11 speaks about this. The Spirit’s mission to unconverted persons is to “convict” them. The imagery here is one of a prosecuting attorney against the world. About this Borchert<sup>35</sup> writes:

“The first appears to be like a charge for which the defendant has been indicted. The second can be envisioned as the standard to which the defendant is required to conform, and the third can be viewed as the rationale the presiding judge uses to render the verdict. All of these elements can come within the basic meaning of this Greek verb, which is “bring to light, expose, set forth.”

How does the Spirit convict the world? One view is that He convicts the world through the holy living of Christians. Perhaps the best view is that the Spirit indirectly convicts sinners via the Word of God, which is produced by His own work of revelation and inspiration. This explanation does fit the context of John 16. In 16.12-15 Jesus tells the disciples they will be guided into all truth by the Spirit. The gospel truth convicts the world.

## How the Spirit Uses the Word

On this, there are two disagreeing viewpoints. One is what Campbell referred to as the Word Alone System.<sup>36</sup> This view believes that the Spirit’s divine authorship of Scripture makes Him ultimately responsible for anything accomplished by it. In this view, **the power of the words reside in those**

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<sup>35</sup> Borchert, Gerald L. *John 12–21. Vol. 25B. The New American Commentary.* Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Rowe, F. L. *Campbell-Rice Debate on the Holy Spirit*, n.d.

**words alone**, even in the absence of the author. Everyone who writes articles and books trusts that this is so.

The other view is that the Holy Spirit is always actually present with and alongside the Word of God, and that He is personally using the Word as His instrument whenever its message is being received by human hearts. Alexander Campbell illustrated this through the imagery of a man using an ax to cut down a tree. The ax fells the tree, but only through the power put forth through the ax by the ax-wielder himself.

Whichever of the two views a person holds of how the Spirit works through the Word, it is still true that He works through the Word and does in this manner lead sinners to faith and repentance.

## For Thought and Reflection

1. What is the doctrine of total depravity? What is its effect on the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion?
2. How did the restoration writers respond to the T.U.L.I.P. doctrine and how it applies to the work of the Holy Spirit?
3. How do we define conversion?
4. What two components does saving faith include?
5. What three components does repentance include?
6. Regarding the power of God's word, what does the Bible say about itself? Cite two passages from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament.

7. What three things fill the word with power?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. How does the Spirit convict the world?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. What are the two views on how the Spirit uses the word to convict sinners?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. Which of these two views seems best to you?